

Post Event Summary Report
White House Conference on Aging

Service as a Strategy for Independent Living Support for Seniors

Sponsored by: Innovations in Civic Participation, AARP, and the National Council on Aging with support from the Corporation for National and Community Service and the Administration on Aging

October 27, 2004
AARP, Washington, D.C.

Background

As the American population ages and people live longer, there will be an increase in the number of people who will require support services to live independently. The problem is occurring not just because of the sheer number of “baby boomers” but because Americans are living longer due to the success of our health care system. Research shows that by 2015, the number of people needing assistance will increase at a rate significantly higher than the number of people able to provide care, creating a crisis in long-term care and independent living support. It is imperative that the nation improve the support structure of this burgeoning senior population without breaking the bank or the resources of millions of family caregivers. A high level of quality support can be achieved if we draw on the deep well of volunteers and national service participants to help meet the challenges of independent living for seniors.

This paper addresses the top three priority issues that first emerged from a May 2003 conference, hosted by ICP, in which leaders from the aging, volunteerism, and nonprofit fields met to create a vision for the nation’s independent living goals in which service would play a distinct and important role in helping to address the growing need to support independent living for seniors. This October 2004 forum’s discussions included conversations about the barriers as well as recommended solutions. All of these discussions present a superb basis for establishing national independent living goals as a major element for further policy development and implementation during the 2005 White House Conference on Aging.

In December, ICP will hold a briefing for bipartisan staff on Capitol Hill that focuses on national service as a strategy to address several important policy issues, including independent living for seniors. Representatives from foundations that support programs and initiatives as well as program representatives and issues experts will participate in the briefing.

Priority Issue #1: How to create pathways from service to the independent living support field.

Given the projected increases in the number of people who will require support to remain living independently in the next 10 to 15 years, it should be a priority for policy makers to develop greater interest in the field of gerontology. The fact is that the number of people needing care will increase at a rate significantly higher than that of the number

of people able to provide care, including family members and paid caregivers. In order to reverse this trend, the field needs to attract larger numbers of workers by looking to new sources of employees. Additionally, poor retention rates due to low wages, long hours, and inadequate training must be improved. All streams of national service programs - Learn and Serve America, AmeriCorps, and Senior Corps, serve to expose people of all ages to the realities of the resources necessary to keep people living independently in their homes and provide important career possibilities in nursing, gerontology and other related careers. It is important to capture the energy that service members bring to their work and turn their experience into longer-lasting impact in a variety of related career fields.

Barriers:

- There are currently no established “pipelines” in national service to careers in the aging field despite the large numbers of national service volunteers working in this area.
- The looming crisis in long-term care is not yet public knowledge. It is important to not only highlight this issue, but also to have viable solutions and infrastructure ready to absorb people interested in service to assist with long-term care needs.
- Despite the large amount of hands-on experience that national service volunteers accrue over their term of service, there is currently no mechanism to convert this time spent into credit that could count toward training hours for certification and/or degrees in this field.

Proposed Solution(s):

- **Enlist academia.** Careers in gerontology and independent living support need greater emphasis in campus programs like social work, but other fields should be tapped, too, such as architecture and business. Creating specialized dorms, fellowships and internships, loan forgiveness programs as well as using work/study programs - all geared to service opportunities in senior care - would expose many more young people to the possibilities of careers in this field. Universities should open the way for older, career-changers who want to specialize in this area.
- **Start early.** Use existing curriculum on sensitivity to seniors and expand on it in high school service learning programs. Match middle and high school students to a senior involved in volunteer service. Educate guidance counselors to careers in this field.
- **Focus the Corporation for National and Community Service on Independent Living for Seniors.** A start has been made, and it is important to maintain the momentum. For example, if AmeriCorps service could be extended and result in a certification for the member, members might make a transition from AmeriCorps to a career in senior care. The Corporation for National and Community Service could become a laboratory for developing these best practices that are research based.

- **Appeal to career changers and baby boomers.** Adapting technology to serve those in independent living might entice career changers or younger retirees into considering a second career or to volunteer in this field.
- **Infuse independent living service into other service programs.** Tap all service programs, such as City Year, to include independent living support as a component. Focus on persuading mentors for children to apply the same structured relationship as mentors for at-home seniors. Work with business leadership to understand independent living needs, especially of the families of employees, and encourage them to select this area for company service projects. Use state workforce training programs to emphasize the independent living field.

Priority Issue #2: How to increase public support for and awareness of national service volunteers as a critical component of the continuum of care.

To meet the impending crisis in long-term care, policymakers and the public need to be made aware of the achievements of national service in helping seniors to remain living independently. The research on the benefits volunteers bring to the independent living field is compelling. Volunteers are competent, caring, and cost-effective. They also, however, are under appreciated by professionals and policymakers even though the contributions of volunteers enhance the work of paid staff and extend the public investments in senior care. The challenge is to get the positive message out to multiple audiences, nationally and locally.

Barriers:

- To make the ‘business case’ for national service, it is imperative to demonstrate that volunteers are a critical component of the continuum of care; it is sometimes difficult to differentiate volunteer service as a product no one else in the field is providing.
- The stories of national service contributions to keeping seniors living independently make a great case for continuing and expanding upon the current initiatives but are not well-known or widely told.

Proposed Solution(s):

- **Start early.** This must be a long-term strategy – one of building a familiarity with and commitment to intergenerational care. It should extend from K-12 initiatives into community college and university programs.
- **Present data and personal stories to policymakers.** Research, such as the Research Triangle Institute study of the Senior Companion program, should be paired with anecdotal testimony from family members benefiting from respite care. This information should be presented to Congress and other policymakers, with the emphasis on the care and cost saving for which research currently exists.
- **Extend policymaking reach.** Use awareness strategies that go beyond the Congressional committee structure for the Departments of Labor and Health and Human Services to elevate independent living to a domestic policy issue as crucial as mobilization for other issues such as AIDS, cancer, etc.

- **Independent Living Champion.** Those supporting service need to find a high profile personality – a “champion” who can make a strong case for investment in linking volunteers to the independent living field.
- **Develop a structure to analyze and make recommendations involving barriers to volunteer service supporting independent living.** These include making taxable income (if the field adopts a business model incorporating for-profit providers) and liability concerns. Make regulations more flexible regarding income caps and age eligibility in the Senior Companion program.
- **Create networking among groups/interests.** Use professional associations, advocate organizations, philanthropies, corporations, labor, faith-based groups, and care-giving businesses to both develop public relations strategies and to bring shared issues/best approaches to the table.

Priority Issue #3: How to create alliances between policymakers and programs in both the service field and long-term care field to develop common goals.

Nurses, nurses’ aides and home health aides provide the majority of paid in-home care services to seniors. The tasks performed by national service volunteers complement those services provided by trained, paid staff; volunteers provide companionship, help with transportation, and perform light chores. Policymakers promoting national service as part of the solution to meeting the demands for long-term care services must assure the paid professionals and paraprofessionals that volunteers exist to supplement, not supplant, their work.

In the coming years, there will be more than enough work for professionals, paid staff and volunteers in taking care of seniors wanting to live independently. The challenges are to build trust, find ways for professional knowledge to enhance the services of volunteers and create ways for both sectors to decide on common goals.

Barriers:

- Paid professionals may view volunteers as a low-cost alternative to trained workers. It is important to build trust between paid professional staff and volunteers, clarifying that national service volunteers are there to perform complementary tasks that free up professionals’ time to concentrate on the work they are paid to do.
- There is a lack of communication between the sectors working in the aging field, which prevents collaboration and cooperation among groups. At the moment there is no network in place for both the paid and volunteer sectors to connect and decide on common goals.

Proposed Solution(s):

- **Evaluate opportunities in federal programs to expand services and create flexibility.** These would include the Corporation for National and Community Service and its Senior Companion program of the Senior Corps, the National Family Caregiver Program, and the Administration on Aging. Encourage joint Congressional hearings on issues/programs for the aging, not only among the programs above but also regarding initiatives in the Department of Transportation and others.
- **Address tensions between volunteer efforts and those of paid professionals.** Most communities have multiple providers of services for the elderly, but instead of fostering competition, there should be information and incentives to work cooperatively, e.g. not have private providers try to “raid” contributions of those receiving low, below-minimum-wage stipends for serving as companions. Stress that there is enough work for everyone.
- **Establish standards and boundaries.** Volunteers and professionals need to have standards that distinguish them from one another, and the former need to learn from the latter about basic skills and standards. Establish a certification program for volunteers, which might entice retiring baby boomers into the service field.
- **Establish a clearinghouse.** This should be a cross-agency clearinghouse, perhaps housed in a current program such as Senior Corps of the Corporation for National and Community Service or the Administration on Aging (although funding for its current Elder Care Locator program would need to increase significantly to become a full-blown clearinghouse). Currently, AoA cannot collect data on volunteers, which limits the information and stories available to justify expansion of the program.
- **Partner service resources with home health care agencies.** Service providers need to keep costs down while expanding their reach, and more formal partnerships could address the issue of maintaining quality services.
- **Find ways to develop common goals.** Use such avenues as the grant makers forum, the upcoming White House Conference on the Aging, and meetings with Congressional staff to foster discussions and consensus about the roles of volunteer care and home health care providers.
- **Continue to build a network.** There should be a continuing effort to bring together groups that can expand volunteer care services without threatening paraprofessional home health care providers and establish certification standards and training.